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ABSTRACT

A series of case studies observed a literacy program for adolescents and adults which can be administered to 16 students at a time, includes training in touch typing and word processing, treats phonics on an adult level, and uses the kind of technology (such as interactive computer programs) that in itself defines "literacy" for our age. Literacy classes in four secondary schools (101 students) and four adult learning centers (27 students) were observed. Overall, the students showed gains in scores on the standardized reading comprehension tests, acquired some typing and word processing skills, reacted positively to the course, and viewed their participation as a success experience. Implications are that: (1) the programs need to be accompanied by appropriate guidance, counseling, and supplementary training; (2) it is probably difficult to develop a program that is equally suitable for adult and adolescent students; (3) programs need to be developed with a full understanding and appreciation of the context in which they will be offered; (4) to minimize dropout and poor attendance, it is important to determine the recruitment methods, selection criteria, program configuration, and types of encouragement that best predict program completion and attendance; (5) students entering literacy training programs do not seem to be as discouraged by past failures as "folk wisdom" and popular literature might suggest; (6) it is no easier to detect subtle personal changes in students in literacy training programs than in any other educational interventions; (7) literacy training for adolescents and adults may be enhanced by the inclusion of novel and timely components and approaches; and (8) there seems to be some advantage in small group instruction for adults. (SR)

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LITERACY IN THE UNITED STATES - HOW?

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According to a recent report by the Education Commission of the States, "Efforts to address the literacy needs of young and mature adults too often have bogged down in fruitless spats over numbers, the drive for budgetary compliance, simplistic assumptions ..." Over all, the services are "fragmentary, provided by a plethora of agencies" (New York Times, 1987). One-on-one tutoring is frequently regarded as the most effective method for teaching literacy skills to adults. However, the two largest volunteer tutoring programs in the United States reach only 127 thousand clients a year - against an estimate of over 20 million adult illiterates.

Thus, it is an occasion for some optimism when a literacy training program comes along that can be administered to 16 students at a time, requires some but not an excessive amount of retraining of instructors, treats phonics on an adult level, and uses the kind of technology that in itself defines a kind of "literacy" for our age.

In an attempt to assess the effectiveness of this program, we learned more than we counted on - about the characteristics of adult and adolescent illiterates, and about the design and implementation of such programs. Some of the insights we gained were reflected in the topics covered in the

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previous paper.

The particular program we examined is described by its inventor as

> a writing and reading system designed to teach functionally illiterate adolescents and adults through the use of the advanced technology of the IBM InfoWindow system and interactive videodiscs. A student Work Journal reinforces the audio and visual learning on the videodiscs. The program also utilizes IBM word processors and typewriters for touch typing training and for word and sentence composition. (Martin, 1987, p. 5)

The program uses the most common definition of 'functional illiteracy': 'reading at or below fifth-grade level.'

The program is divided into three phases: a "myth" about the Invention of the Alphabet, presented in cartoon form via videodiscs; Work Journals, in which students practice making words on the basis of how the words sound; and Personal Writing, in which students are introduced to the steps in what is called "process writing" and are supposed to produce a biographical sketch, other compositions, and job resumes and applications. During the first two phases, students learn and practice touch typing for at least half of the class periods; in the third phase they are taught the basic word processing functions. For most of the activities, it is recommended that students work in pairs. The total program is intended to take about 100 hours, although it is recognized that some students will need more time and some may go through the program in less time.

Our study was an observational study - or series of "case studies" - of classes in four secondary schools and four adult learning centers (including one correctional facility). The high school students had reached anywhere

between the 8th and 12th grades and were still scoring between fourth- and sixth-grade levels on standardized reading comprehension tests. [The program was thus offered as "remedial" education, as contrasted with "compensatory" or "special" education, a distinction that is important for administrative and funding purposes in the United States, as well as for evaluation research design (Anderson, 1973).] A total of 118 high school students entered the project classes; 101 completed the program.

The initial adult groups totalled 48 students; 21 dropped out. They ranged in age from 16 to 73. A few had graduated from high school; some had gone no further than the early grades.

Measures included interviews with students, standardized reading comprehension tests, writing exercises, typing and word processing checks, and, most important, classroom observations throughout the course.

Overall, the students showed gains in scores on the standardized reading comprehension tests, acquired some typing and word processing skills, reacted positively to the course, appeared to be going about the required tasks in an orderly and purposeful manner, and viewed their participation as a "success" experience (that is, felt they had improved their reading and writing skills). These results were satisfying to the program sponsor, and some should have favorable consequences as the students undertake other courses. We were particularly impressed by the practice in self-discipline which the course seemed to encourage and the feelings of accomplishment expressed by students who may have gone a long time with few academic successes.

But what else did the results teach us or lead us to consider about developing and implementing literacy training programs?

1. The programs need to be accompanied by appropriate guidance, counseling, and supplementary training. We might say this about any educational program, but for the kinds of students who are classified as "illiterate" there is a particular need for such services.

For example, the students in our study showed little familiarity with jobs, and the high school students were especially unrealistic in their aspirations. Many indicated that "with some training" they would be able to do almost any kind of job (including business executive, librarian, magazine writer, and professional engineer). "College" was the post-high school ambition of 43 and 67% of the students in two of the high schools.

2. It is probably difficult to develop a program that is equally suitable for adult and adolescent students, although in this case an attempt had been made to do so.

For example, many adults objected to the story about the Invention of the Alphabet, where the heroes and heroines are teenagers. The pairing of students, widely regarded as a good instructional strategy, seemed to work well with the in-school adolescents but broke down in adult groups characterized by wider discrepancies in ability and higher absenteeism rates.

3. Programs need to be developed with a full understanding and

appreciation of the context in which they will be offered.

The 100-hour duration recommended for this program was unrealistic in terms of conventional school schedules. Only one of the high schools approached the recommended 100 hours, and there special arrangements were made for students to be in the program for two 40-minute periods a day, rather than the usual 50 to 60 minutes. Such an adjustment would not be possible in other schools where, except for this class, students pursued regular courses. Students in the other three high schools averaged only 65, 38, and 49 hours. In the most conventional of the adult classes, a good attendance average of 89% still resulted in adults being in the program an average of only 68 hours. In the other adult classes, students averaged from 42 to 75 hours during the period of the study. It is little wonder that we saw little improvement in personal writing, the focus of the last phase of the program.

There are many subtle aspects of context that program developers and implementers should acquaint themselves with as well. For example, the classroom lending library is considered an important component of the program we observed. High school students and unincarcerated adults could usually take the "easy" books they checked out to a place where they could read them unobserved. The prisoners did not have that kind of privacy and were afraid that their cell mates would laugh at such books; so they didn't check them out.

4. To minimize dropout and poor attendance, which can defeat any adult program, it is important to determine the recruitment methods, selection

criteria, program configuration, and types of encouragement that best predict program completion and attendance. An open-entry, open-exit program with flexible hours may be necessary to attract and hold some adult students, and many adults need special assistance such as transportation and child care.

In one of the centers where we worked, the county human service agency required General Assistance clients who were judged to be functionally illiterate to participate in the literacy training program in order to receive assistance. A total of 89 adults had entered the program between January 1987 and the end of January 1988. Eleven completed the program during these 13 months; another 30 dropped out; the remainder were continuing in the program or were "on hold" (not currently attending because of some conflict such as birth of a child, lack of transportation, or a jail sentence). Not incidentally, the program was conducted in the dreariest and most uninviting setting we observed anywhere - an old elementary school where the toilets were child size.

With respect to dropout, we had assumed that the prison offered the one center where dropout would not be a problem. We were wrong. One of the 10 students entering the program during our observations attended only about half the sessions, though he was expected to continue in the program. Four dropped out completely: one was transferred to a regular ABE class, one was paroled, one was put into isolation on a "controlled substance" charge, and one was dropped in another disciplinary action.

5. Instructors may want to take account of the fact that students entering literacy training programs do not seem to be as discouraged by past

failures - or lacking in the belief that they **can** learn and improve - as "folk wisdom" and some popular literature might suggest. In our study, from 83 to 100% of the high school students were confident that they would be able to improve their reading and writing skills in the program; 84% of the adults thought they would be able to improve.

6. Many adult literacy programs, including the one we investigated, put a lot of faith in the notion that as students improve their reading and writing skills they also experience significant gains in self-confidence and feelings of personal worth. This is a reasonable expectation, but it is no easier to detect subtle personal changes in students in literacy training programs than in any other educational interventions. In fact, it is **more** difficult to verify the claims since existing measurement instruments in this domain generally demand more sophisticated reading skills than these students have. Evaluators will usually have to rely on clues from observations and interviews. On the basis of our study, one affective response from students that we would like to follow up on is a shift over the course of the program from blaming other people or factors for their reading/writing performance to taking more responsibility for it themselves. The former seems to be associated with feeling of "failure," the latter with feelings of "success."

7. Literacy training for adolescents and adults may be enhanced by the inclusion of novel and timely components and approaches. Most of these students have been exposed to standard school approaches to teaching reading and writing. They didn't work! The program that serves as the basis for our remarks uses interactive computer programs, includes training in touch typing

and word processing, and even avoids as far as possible the typical schoolroom atmosphere, attempting to establish an office-like atmosphere instead. (Adults are addressed as Mr. or Ms.) These are not just gimmicks; they are based on sound pedagogical and psychological premises. "Why," we asked the students, "do you think you improved in this course when you didn't do so well in your earlier school courses?" Large percentages answered in terms of "the way the course was taught with computers." The typing and typing games were also cited frequently as positive aspects of the course.

8. Even though one-on-one tutoring is the training method preferred by many experts in the field, there seems to be some advantage in small group instruction for adults. One of the adult classes we observed clearly served as much as a social support group as a learning situation. As one student remarked, "It is good to be in a class with other people like me, to know that there are other people who can't read very well."

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